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Geographies of Violence



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Synonyms

[Power](#); [Space](#); [Violence](#); [Violent geographies](#)

Violence, derived from the Greek meaning “force or constraint,” is a multivarious entity that manifests differently across space. The multifaceted forms of violence occur along a continuum. In some cases, violence manifests overtly in physical and direct ways while other forms of violence may be concealed within cultural norms, rhetoric, or the environment. Much of the geographic scholarship on violence may trace its roots to Johann Galtung (1969, 1990) who categorized violence in a trinary manner: direct violence or physical injury (e.g., terrorism, detention, war); structural or “indirect” violence, inequitable economic, societal, or political norms cause harm (e.g., marginalization or exploitation); and cultural which normalizes the other forms of violence (e.g., “seems normal or did not notice.”) In addition to Galtung, conceptualizations of cultural violence also include work that draws on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) (also, see Springer, 2011). In contrast, Hannah Arendt described violence as instrumental by nature, suggesting that while

power is critical to the conceptualization of violence, she argued that “power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy” (1970, 56).

Feminist examinations highlight the diversity of experiences and components of violence, both domestic and non-domestic, including economic, political, social, how the built environment can engender unsafe spaces, and the often-gendered nature of violence in war, such as rape recognized as a weapon of war (Hays-Mitchell, 2005). Additionally, feminist analysis describes the intersection of urban and highly gendered “sites of violence” and may also include racialized elements that contribute to the embodied experience of violence (Dowler, 2012; Giles & Hyndman, 2004; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). Feminist geopolitical perspectives highlight the cultural and structural violence that both normalizes and buttresses domestic and non-domestic assault, intimate violence, harassment, pay inequities, and other forms of socio-political experiences of violence against women and gender minorities (Chatterji & Mehta, 2007; Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Fluri, 2022; Holmes et al., 2015; Myadar & Davidson, 2021; Pain, 1991; Tyner, 2012).

The modern state system - territory, statecraft, and political control - is established and reinforced through monopolization of violence within its borders paired with the threat of employing violence to administer and uphold the law (Hobbes, 1651; Weber, 1918). Thus, state sovereignty may

be interpreted as a particular form of violence over human bodies, particularly as the state may suspend its laws, thus forging spaces of exception (Agamben, 2008). Political violence manifests in various ways (Cowen & Gilbert, 2008; Koopman et al., 2021). This includes rioting or protests that are a response to state oppression, physical violence, or gross negligence of fundamental human rights (Le Billon, 2001). State territorial control, exclusionary citizenship protocols, and “securitization” procedures, often most visible within borderlands and borderscapes, generate various forms of violence commonly forged as a constitutive part of efforts to control migrant mobilities (Jones, 2016; Glouftsiou & Casaglia, 2023; Nevins, 2001; Mountz et al., 2012). Such forms of Othering bind multiple forms of violence to bodies and communities across geographic space. Dempsey identified five often-overlapping categories of violence experienced by asylum seekers who traveled to the E.U.: physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and non-linear (“disrupted potential for life with some stability and growth/life integrity” (2020, 3).

Colonialism and Imperialism employ physical, economic, and political violence to establish and maintain control over space (Gregory, 2004). Additionally, interpersonal violence intertwined with these practices is deeply rooted in racism, xenophobia, and sexualized politics (Said, 1978). Indeed genocide, an effort to geographically erase a particular group, is commonly actualized as a result of colonial and imperial practices. Other veins of analyses focus on the legal concept of genocide as a specific form of violence (see Flint & Dempsey, 2024; Jeffrey, 2023). Colonial and Imperial land accumulation—a violent process—is legitimized under the guise of civilization, development, or security (Flint, 2023; Dalby, 2004, 2008). The spatialization of such forms of violence is commonly enforced through expulsion and/or containment (e.g., Hyndman, 2019). Indeed, the colonial present reveals overlapping layers of various forms of violence, including the creation of spaces of exception, such as detention centers and camps (Martin et al., 2020). Other forms of political violence include terrorism—a form of warfare and an act of politics, with the

intent to generate fear and intimidation among the public as a weapon commonly against the state (Flint, 2004). Since 9/11, geographic analyses highlight that state and non-state actors can generate such forms of political violence, often framed as an effort to resist domination over territory, efforts to self-govern, or in response to political and/or economic deprivation (Flint & Dempsey, 2023). Manifestations include anti-colonial nationalists, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and those who wage a religious- “cosmic war” (Agnew, 2009; Dempsey, 2022, 2023; McDowell, 2008; Toal & Dahlman, 2011). Counter-terrorism efforts, such as the Global War on Terror, simultaneously spawn a multitude of corresponding violence (Falah et al., 2006; Gregory & Pred, 2007; Ingram & Dodds, 2016; Kobayashi, 2009; O’Loughlin, 2005).

Examinations of economic violence include tracing the history of exploitation to how the practice of war underpins global trade. The multitude of violent practices that constitute slavery is also commonly linked to a demand for labor within an exploitative economic system. Marxist geographies often highlight how economic accumulation is forged through a series of dispossession and exploitation. This includes theories of how conflict-laden landscapes mask a generalized economy of violence produced through capitalist neo-liberal practices (Harvey, 2006; Mitchell, 2002). Postcolonial geographies emphasize how the violence of forced removal and land dispossession of indigenous peoples was an intrinsic force in colonial economies and “Western” property laws and “resource wars,” among other (s) (Curley, 2021; Davies & Isakjee, 2019; Le Billon, 2004; Pain, 2021; Radcliffe, 2005; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). Other analyses elucidate how gentrification-induced displacement may constitute a form of cultural violence that conceals intersecting forms of social and financial inequalities (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020). Research also reveals how the global economic order, establishment and safeguarding of a global supply chain, and transnational trade are underpinned with collective violence that actively reconfigures geographies of security and citizenship (Cowen, 2014). Koch (2013, 2015) demonstrates how

allocating state funds for political projects instead of supporting their financially vulnerable society can be a form of structural violence that is concealed within banal capitalist practices.

Scholarly work on the often overlooked “slow violence” highlights *time* as an actor when considering the spatialities of violence. Thus, colonial violence is con-constitutive of more than property and economic aspects; it also examines the embodied slow violence against indigenous women and children (De Leeuw, 2016). Studies of the slow violence of racism interrogate the criminalization of race, mass incarcerations, or increased exposure to geographies of toxic pollution. Slow violence is intertwined with the environment. Indeed, land governance, resource determinism, pollution, anthropogenic climate change, and in-action to address these elements are only some examples of the temporal spaces of slow environmental violence (Nixon, 2011; DeBoom, 2021; O’Lear, 2016).

While historically, geography was a discipline of violence—an instrument of war, Colonialism, and Imperialism—recent geographic scholarship now exposes and scrutinizes the multitudes of spatialized violence (Mamadouh, 2023). At the same time, geographies of peace/pacific geographies have become an important subfield within the discipline. With its new foci and avenues of research, our field is well-positioned to be at the fore of calls for and efforts to forge societies free from violence.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Borders and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Carceral Geographies](#)
- ▶ [Climate Change and Human Geography](#)
- ▶ [Colonialism](#)
- ▶ [Corruption and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Determinism](#)
- ▶ [Feminist Geography](#)
- ▶ [Geographies of Fear](#)
- ▶ [Geographies of Poverty](#)
- ▶ [Geographies of Terrorism](#)
- ▶ [Geographies of the Body](#)
- ▶ [Geography and Crime](#)
- ▶ [Global Debt](#)
- ▶ [Human Trafficking](#)
- ▶ [Hunger and Famine](#)
- ▶ [Imperialism](#)
- ▶ [Islamophobia](#)
- ▶ [Masculinities and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Military Geography](#)
- ▶ [Neocolonialism](#)
- ▶ [Neoliberalism and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Orientalism](#)
- ▶ [Policing and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Race and Racism](#)
- ▶ [Refugees and Geography](#)
- ▶ [Segregation](#)
- ▶ [Slow Violence](#)
- ▶ [Socio-Spatial Inequality](#)
- ▶ [Underdevelopment](#)
- ▶ [Urban Underclass](#)
- ▶ [War and Geography](#)

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