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# *Prevention Speech 2018*
# *Violence and Radicalism, Past and Present*

**Ute Frevert**

From: Claudia Heinzelmann and Erich Marks (Eds.):
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# Prevention Speech 2018
# Violence and Radicalism, Past and Present

How does society deal with and prevent violence and radicalism? And how do you grapple with them in the various aspects of your life? You as practitioners have concrete experience with this and may be wondering what a historian has to contribute to this topic at all.

What I can do is de-dramatise. Because we experience contemporary events in the moment they happen and may even be directly involved in them, we tend to receive them in a highly dramatic fashion – highly dramatic and unprecedented, completely new, and therefore overwhelming. Historians, however, take a wide view into and onto the past. Their look back on past events can help us better situate our present within the broader continuum of time. It can help us track down older traditions and bring past experiences back into the collective memory, which is increasingly becoming limited to short-term memory. At the same time, retrieval and recollection make it easier to identify the genuinely new and unprecedented – and to keep it in check. This in turn facilitates the constructive dispelling of the drama and scandal surrounding certain events. That is a good thing, because no good policy can emerge from the fog of scandalisation and dramatisation.

Violence and radicalism: These are two terms that make us shudder, terms that really have no place in our civilised world, a world in which we teach children at home and at school to respect each other and above all not to try to resolve conflicts with violence.

But – and this should not be forgotten – this learning process is slow, agonisingly slow, both for each individual person and for society as a whole.

Historically speaking, we have made progress. According to crime statistics, violent crime, and in particular murder and grievous bodily harm, have long been on the decline. Some things that were previously allowed are now punishable offences, such as marital rape and sexual harassment. Sure, the numbers are still high. But they already were in the late nineteenth century, when the state and its officials began compiling figures on reported crimes and their punishment.

Even unrecorded violence – for example among male adolescents and young men – has probably not increased in our part of the world. Fighting in the schoolyard or on the way home occurs today, but it was also occurring two hundred years ago. Moreover, children and teenagers in past times could take adults as their negative role models: Until the 1970s, fathers and teachers did not hesitate to flog children. Church festivals and fairs were events where men's fists flew, often drunkenly.

Until well into the twentieth century, violent forms of punishment and discipline were taken for granted. Only with difficulty did we bid farewell to public corporal punishment around the middle of the nineteenth century. Behind closed doors, however, in schools and in juvenile reform institutions, in prisons and in the military, flogging was allowed to continue, and to no small extent.

This, too, is an aspect of violence: the "legitimate" violence that those in positions of authority inflict upon their subordinates. During the First World War, soldiers complained about the demeaning, violent punishments that were inflicted upon them by officers, often for minor offences. Public pressure led to the abolition of these forms of castigation, at least officially. We regularly learn from the press that unofficial actions in the military can still be degrading and violent.

With all that, I want to make two points: first, violence is not just the recent act of a young man kicking a young woman down the stairs in a Berlin subway station just for the heck of it. Violence is also at work where institutions practise outmoded forms of discipline and obedience behind closed doors, often with physical violence. Secondly, both forms of violence have a long tradition. They did not just emerge in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, a lot has changed in recent decades: on the one hand, we have had considerable success in ridding public institutions of violent methods. But this did not just happen by itself. Again and again, members of the public have criticised violent attacks, submitted petitions, written complaints. It took a long time. Lawmakers in Germany waited until the year 2000 to guarantee every child the right to a non-violent upbringing.

On the other hand, the public has become more sensitive. What was common in the nineteenth century offends today. It was ultimately a new generation of parents who put an end to flogging by teachers –

but this, too, took until the late 1960s. A central motivator was the rejection of humiliation. Humiliation does not always involve physical violence. Humiliation can also be effectuated through glares, words, gestures – or though a lack thereof (for example, by not greeting someone warmly). On the other hand, violence always has a humiliating effect: it makes it clear to the victim that the perpetrator has no respect for them, literally knocking them down.

Humiliation has been made into a problem because our society has become democratic and we have internalised the principle of civil equality. It is therefore no coincidence that people's sensitivity towards humiliation grew with the social process of learning and practicing democratic values and behaviours. The late 1960s and 1970s were a watershed moment. The widespread rebellion against authorities – professors, teachers, the police, judges, etc. – was connected with the demand that people should not be made to get down on their knees before them any longer, neither literally nor metaphorically.

This, however, does not mean that violence and the potential for humiliation among equals have been structurally done away with once and for all. Contemporary reports of bullying among pupils and colleagues speak volumes. On the other hand, this is not a completely new phenomenon. What is new is the indignation about such behaviour, the sensitivity with which people react to it.

And what is also new is the frequency with which society finds out about it. The press reports it. Social media produce new examples by the second, serving as platforms where abuse both takes place and is widely reported. There are websites where you can watch so-called happy slapping, while others approvingly post video recordings of gang rapes.

We tend to describe these trends as the brutalisation of our society, as examples of a new quality and quantity of violence arrogated by some members of society at the expense of others. Whether manners in this country are actually so much rougher and more disrespectful than thirty, fifty or a hundred years ago is difficult to verify. What matters is that we feel that this is the case. And this, in turn, has to do with a greater expectation than in the past that people treat each other with the respect they demand from others.

Violence overrides and denies this respect. Sometimes violence is without direction, has no immediate cause, hits its object randomly, and is thus not strategic and power-oriented in the true sense. Much more frequently, however, violence, whether physical or verbal, is directed against specific victims, who are always vulnerable people: the homeless, foreigners and, above all, women. Anyone who reads the hate mail that outspoken politicians and journalists like Claudia Roth or Dunja Hayali receive can only be frightened by such targeted, enthusiastic aggressiveness. Almost all this hate mail comes from men, and all attack the gender of their victims. This is indeed something new. This genuine misogyny is an important issue to discuss at a major conference on prevention. How do we deal with the resentment, fear of a loss of status, insecurity, and frustration that many people feel and that they, much more than before, express in public?

One more word about radicalism. Being radical is, in itself, not really a bad thing. Radical means getting to the root of something, fundamentally, profoundly, unbendingly. But it also means being uncompromising. Those who behave radically are not out to communicate, but to assert their own positions. A radical moralist – and almost all radicals are moralists – does not accept other opinions, and he does not take a critical perspective on his own morals. Talking to radicals is difficult because they do not listen and refuse to budge even a nanomillimeter from their convictions.

Germany has a lot of experience with radicalism. The late 1920s and early 1930s were marked by a political radicalisation that gripped two camps – Communists and National Socialists – and dragged them into a spiral of violence. At that time there were even fights in the Reichstag and verbal war games, which have yet to be repeated in the German parliament. Even the so-called politics of the street is also much more civil today than it was then, when paramilitary groups beat each other up and committed political murders.

Nevertheless, the new radicalisation that is currently taking place must not be underestimated. If it does lead to a larger movement, it would pose a serious threat to our democracy, because a key characteristic of democracy is the ability of opposing political opinions and interests to engage in conflict without violence. These conflicts rarely end with one side winning and the other giving in. Usually, a compromise is found that is tolerable for both sides. The refusal to compromise under the auspices of radicalism means the end of democratic communication.

This is where the much-discussed centre of society is called upon to speak out. In the 1930s, National Socialism succeeded in conquering this centre and radicalising it as well. Nowadays, especially in view of the favourable economic situation and seventy years of learning experience in democracy, it should be easier to keep the centre stable and democratic.

That does not mean ignoring radical extremes. Rather, it is a matter of driving a rift between the extremists and those who vote for them out of protest. They should take their place in the broad democratic centre again, and we must argue with them about compromises. That, too, is part of prevention.

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# Content

## II. Lectures and Documents from the International Conference on Prevention of Violence and Extremism – PV&E



## III. Annex