



**Jan Philipp Reemtsma.** *Vertrauen und Gewalt: Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne.* Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, HIS Verlag, 2008. 576 S. ISBN 978-3-936096-89-7.



**Reviewed by** Shelley O. Baranowski

**Published on** H-German (April, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Jan Philipp Reemtsma's *Vertrauen und Gewalt* confronts what he identifies as the central riddle of modernity, the modern belief that violence is abnormal or somehow pathological despite continued evidence of egregious atrocities, particularly those of the twentieth century. His investigation begins with the exasperated question that is often posed, particularly in response to the Holocaust: how was it that "completely normal men," or "completely normal family men" could participate in the Nazi regime's genocidal massacres, killing not only other men but also slaughtering women and children with little compunction? Such questions, argues Reemtsma, say more about the tenacity of the sensibilities of the "European-Atlantic West" than they reveal about the motivations of perpetrators or the significance of their murderous acts.

The roots of this modern riddle, according to the author, lie in the mid-seventeenth century when the Peace of Westphalia ended over a century and a half of religious warfare. The emerging centralized states, as well as societies that became

increasingly divided by function, combined to create a general trust that order would be preserved because the state's monopoly on the exercise of violence guaranteed the safety of its citizens. This did not mean the elimination of mistrust among individuals or groups, but the emergence of the modern state did create the recognition that national unity compensated in various ways for social inequalities, and that the state's exercise of violence was no longer a given but now required legitimation and legal codification. Whereas all civilizations have distinguished between violence that was forbidden, permitted, or demanded, only in the West was the first expanded and the second and third curtailed. Thus, total wars, genocide, and thermonuclear weapons capable of eradicating humanity surprise us as contrary to our norms. After distinguishing between violence designed to confine or expel stigmatized groups (*lozierende Gewalt*) and sexual violence, Reemtsma lands on a third kind of violence that proves most difficult for us to grasp (p. 117). "Autotelic" violence, that is, violence for its own sake, moti-

vates perpetrators to destroy their victims simply because they have the power to do so (p. 139). Whether initiated by the state or by social groups, it provides the most direct challenge to states' monopoly on the use of force, and the claims to legitimacy that they deploy to justify it. Ironically, because states have in the modern era increasingly encouraged participation in the nation to ensure unity, autotelic violence has resulted as participants have made use of it to raise their own social standing.

Interlaced with his revisions of sociological theory and literary references ranging from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to William Shakespeare, Reemtsma devotes much of his time to explicating the most extreme cases of autotelic violence, the Terror of the French Revolution, and especially Bolshevism and Nazism. Jacobins and Bolsheviks justified violence as a temporary expedient against their enemies while preserving their revolutions and strengthening their states. They justified their excesses by promising a future of social equality and nonviolence. Yet because the National Socialist "rhetoric of genocide" went beyond the "eschatological cleansing" of the enemies of revolution, it constituted a break from modernity by franchising the exercise of violence among competing feudalities. Despite its claim to purify the *Volksgemeinschaft* for all time, the Nazi regime turned its murderousness into a permanent "life form" (*Lebensform*). Whatever its own promises of a peaceful future for the *Volk*, had National Socialism somehow triumphed in the war, the result would not have been a modern empire, but a dystopia composed of rival warlords dependent on slave labor, fighting endlessly amongst themselves with unimaginable cruelty. Although the Allies engaged in their own autotelic violence when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Harry Truman and Winston Churchill, notes Reemstma, positively rejoiced over the successful test of the bomb and the destructive power it promised them), the desperate yearning to limit violence

and restore legitimacy to power produced varied strategies to shield us from horror (p. 349). Because the atom bomb was instrumentalized as the only means to end the war, Hiroshima, with this interpretation of its use, was thus not an example of autotelic violence. Subsequently, international war crimes tribunals confined the accused to judicial discourses that obscured, rather than clarified, the "whys" of their acts and the interests of third parties who profited from them. Regardless of their value as windows into the experiences of victims, the survivors' accounts that proliferated after World War II rendered incomprehensible the motivations of killers. Reemtsma recommends that we unflinchingly confront the potential for violence and the grim lust for power that drives it in order to preserve what we claim to value. Responding to the arguments for legalizing torture in the wake of September 11, he warns the proponents of that position that they will end up destroying the way of life they want to protect (p. 128). They risk adopting the model of the first half of the twentieth century, the clannish and existentially defined "we" mentality that at its worst, sought the elimination of "enemies" because the perpetrators had the power to do so. The "war on terror" imitates the terrorists as it undermines constitutional limits on the state's use of force.

Reemstma deserves credit for exploring the compulsion to pose the mystified question, "how could they?" In so doing, he offers a thought-provoking analysis of the historical context that, in his view, explains the modern need to ignore or downplay the potential for autotelic violence, especially when the rationales for it have little to do with real, external threats. There has been much discussion in recent years that attributes the excesses of the twentieth century to modernity itself. Although explanations arising from that discussion have often been unconvincing, Reemstma proposes a new direction for this debate: the denial of violence, and not simply its existence, deserves consideration. Yet his approach has its problems, quite apart from the geographical and

conceptual imprecision of the "European-Atlantic West." Although "social trust" is an effective concept for identifying the reciprocal relationship between states and their citizens, in which states monopolize the means of violence in return for protecting their own, Reemstma continues to use it, albeit in reconceived form, when the state's monopoly dissolves into autotelic violence. Reemstma provides a detailed and interesting analysis of the familial bands and client relationships that fueled Bolshevik and Nazi violence, the first derived from the endemic violence of the Russian countryside which was now applied to diverse "enemies," the second from the competition among leadership groups. Yet "trust" as a description of the "us against them" mindset of such tribalism, especially considering the rampant denunciation that defined the Soviet case, distorts its meaning even if we allow Reemstma his argument that in the case of National Socialism, the Third Reich transformed social notions of security and order to fit the murderous ethnocentrism of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Sooner or later, the war that National Socialism unleashed convinced Germans of the disorder and insecurity around them, even as they became complicit in the regime's crimes and stuck it out to the bitter end.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Shelley O. Baranowski. Review of Reemtsma, Jan Philipp. *Vertrauen und Gewalt: Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29802>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.