

Armed Self-Defense in Recent America: Intersectional Perspectives

DFG-research project in cooperation with Profs. Barbara Lüthi (Cologne) and Simon Wendt (Frankfurt/M.), Oct. 2018-Sep. 2021

The project is inspired by the recent escalation of racist gun violence in the United States and the fact that shooters often seek to justify their actions by claiming to have acted in self-defense. Armed self-defense has received surprisingly little attention in U.S. historiography. Given the significance of armed self-defense for understanding interpersonal violence and its legal, political, and cultural ramifications in American history, this is a substantial research void. Our research project will bridge this historiographical gap by examining the history of armed self-defense in recent America, with a particular focus on the 1970s and 1980s. The post-civil rights-era is a crucial, yet underexplored period in the history of violence, during which social and political transformations, contentious debates on the legitimacy of the use of guns, and the racial and gender politics of violence became closely intertwined. The project employs an intersectional approach and concentrates on the racial and gendered dimensions of armed self-defense, yet other sociocultural categories such as social status and space will also be considered, depending on the focus of the subproject. In three subprojects, the project analyzes different historical actors and explores different types of violence from various angles, including black reactions to police brutality, women's responses to sexual violence, and white violence against African Americans. In addition, it probes related debates over whether such forms of violence ought to be recognized as legitimate self-defense.

Using selected case studies as lenses through which to shed light on larger historical configurations, the research project focuses on the question of how violence is rendered reasonable, acceptable, and justified as self-defense, depending on who employs it, who is targeted by it, and in which context it takes place. Additional questions it seeks to answer are: What specific discourses governed the knowledge about and representations of shooters, violence, and self-defense? What larger historical frames make these violent acts seem reasonable and acceptable? Which spaces seemed to justify the use of violence? Did violence and self-defense have different meanings for women and men from different racial and class backgrounds? How and through what means have African Americans, women of color, and other historical actors challenged such frames? By answering these questions, the research project makes an important contribution to the history of self-defense and the history of violence more generally, since it examines the differing positions of various actors and their agency in the power struggle over who can claim the right to self-defense. Ultimately, the project helps explain the paradox of the curious simultaneity of oppression and liberation in America's history of defensive violence.