Are modern societies capable of controlling violence effectively? Media coverage of terrorist attacks, rampage shootings, endless conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and relentless everyday violence in “fragile” states like Somalia or Colombia tends to suggest a pessimistic answer. Events such as these are disconcerting and upsetting not only because of their overwhelming media presence, but also because they give the impression of being completely new forms of violence that are both unpredictable and uncontrollable. Are we therefore to conclude that the societies in which such acts occur have lost control over violence? Or is this merely a false perception, fed by fear and threat discourses, while in reality our options for controlling violence are greater than they have ever been in history? What are the real problems, and what mechanisms of violence control do we have in the twenty-first century? How do the various social, cultural, and historical contexts differ?

A group of researchers from various academic disciplines and different countries spent a year at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at Bielefeld University studying these issues, between October 2007 and September 2008, discussing their findings in a series of conferences with their colleagues in the field. This volume is the result of their work. The book reaps many of the benefits of working in a research group. The collaborative environment created a unique, long-term context for discussions centering on the question of violence control, which in turn gave rise to a common perspective that deeply informs the papers collected in this volume and that is of crucial importance because the spectrum of the contributions is remarkably wide. The papers deal not only with fundamental questions and aspects of violence control—such as the transformation of control mechanisms during processes of modernization; the significance of public discourses and the framing of violence; the relationship between religion and violence; and forms of self-control—but also with three more specialized aspects of violent phenomena which the researchers deem paradigmatic for the discussion of a loss of control over violence, namely school shootings, terrorism, and violence in states in crisis. The cross-disciplinary discussions that arose during the research year are reflected in the integrative thrust of the research topics, which explore the shifting forms, mechanisms, and actors involved in the control of violence. Another common characteristic of the papers, which has been possible not least because of the researchers’ constant and
constructive “confrontations” with colleagues from other disciplines and research fields, is their critical reflection on entrenched opinions and viewpoints. Thus, the research project demonstrated once again that cooperation across disciplinary, geographical, and cultural frontiers is not only possible, but also effective and extraordinarily productive. It is our hope, therefore, that the working relationships and networks that were formed during the research year and in the course of the completion of this book will not only “informally” outlast the project, but will also continue to serve as a source of cooperation, inspiration, and intrepid projects.

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We hope that this volume will provide food for further thought about the inter-relationships between violence and control, even if—in our own experience—such thought may entail a loss of control of some sort.

There is not a single idea of any quality that does not stem from an intoxication, a loss of control, an ability to err and thereby renew oneself. (Emil Cioran, The New Gods)

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