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# THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE: UNDERSTANDING APARTHEID VIOLENCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROTAGONISTS

Foster, D, Haupt, P, and De Beer, M (2005) **The theatre of violence: Narratives of protagonists in the South African conflict.** Cape Town: HSRC Press.

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**The theatre of violence** offers a novel and insightful intervention into how we understand violence in the post apartheid era. It is novel because it deals with the largely neglected perspectives of perpetrators of violence, and insightful because it manages to balance the politics of such an attempt with a need for critical theoretical analysis. In researching (from a loosely narrative and discursive approach) protagonists in the apartheid violence, this book breaks new ground in carefully analysed ways that refuses simple answers.

In particular, the mix of sources that is drawn on is refreshing. The primary source is undoubtedly the interviews conducted with protagonists between 2000 and 2004. However, far from imagining that all claims made in the book stem from the interviews, as has too often been the case in the empiricist traditions from which psychology borrows, they also draw on representations of perpetrators in the media, TRC records, and on academic literature. The result is to gather a number of perspectives and reflect the contradictions and similarities in the discourses circulating in different social arenas.

In addition, this is a book that goes beyond the now quite large literature that reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of TRC and is far more centrally about perpetration of violence more generally, regardless of its status and definition within the TRC. As such it allows for new understandings of violence outside the constraints of the sometimes narrow definitions adopted by the TRC that, when taken for granted, can limit our understandings and close down new questions.

What is particularly useful about this book is its contribution to further undoing the binaries so inherent to current theorising of violence including memory and forgetting; victim and perpetrator; and the political and criminal. As such, this is a brave book because it engages in an open way with a topic that is often thought to be undeserving of attention and even morally reprehensible, namely the perspectives, insights and positionings of those responsible for violence. For this reason, this is not a book that

offers any comforting or easy explanations and, therefore, occasionally raises for the reader some uncomfortable questions, particularly about who is ultimately responsible for violence.

Chapter one gives insight into the TRC and some of the themes it grappled with such as the distinction between criminal and political violence, the definition of a perpetrator, whether those on opposite sides of the violence can be equally guilty and the nature and structure of the testimony that was required. It summarises an existing, and already quite large, body of literature on these issues and considers the strengths and weaknesses of the TRC in light of them. In doing so, it necessarily grapples with different truths that are possible and the eventual prioritisation of positivist truth by the TRC. This chapter raises some central tensions that are revisited throughout the book.

Chapter two is a shift from the extensive focus on the functioning of the TRC to media representations of perpetrators of apartheid violence. It considers how perpetrators were implicitly constructed as black by a largely white controlled and owned press. In addition, it considers the frequent failings of attempts to uncover third force and human rights abuses within the state machinery and how this closed down alternative representations of perpetrators. Aside from a few high profile cases (such as that of Eugene de Kok) the tendency of perpetrators to remain nameless and faceless is perhaps the most striking lesson that this analysis offers us. This is located in a more general need to locate violence within the individual (and within very few individuals) which offers a comforting distance for the rest of us. This chapter explodes this view and revisits the question of who is a perpetrator in the context of such an entrenched system of inequality such as apartheid. This analysis has transferability to a number of other contexts and is useful for trying to understand representations of violence in general terms (I, for one, was drawn to thinking about the difficulty of analysing and attempting to understand abusers in studies of domestic violence).

Chapter three delves into the academic debates on violence that have emerged although the focus is largely on those theories that have been generated in or taken up by psychology. This chapter argues that, in contrast to media representations, academic theories of violence have focussed on perpetrators as “ordinary people”. This raises an ongoing and fraught tension that returns throughout the book between agency and social conditions as the causes of violence. Similarly the relativity of victim and perpetrator positionings is highlighted. The authors put forward a “relational theory” of violence which I will discuss later on.

Chapter four appealed to me from the moment it mentioned morals as a methodological dilemma. This is just one of many telling silences in methodology that nevertheless is a subtext that is highlighted when we consider the lack of attention to perpetrators in the literature. Raising the issue of morality brings old criticisms of positivist approaches to light in new and refreshing ways. It offers a position of critical reflection on perpetrators’ accounts in a way that resists simple solutions and requires an engagement with violence that cannot allow us to slip into a simplistic claim to objectivity that has so often been the solution offered to dealing with the politics of research.

Chapters five and six give the accounts of the police and state intelligence members whilst chapters seven and eight give accounts of liberation movement members and

those involved in township violence. The narratives are compelling and reflect the range of ways in which people participated in violence as well as the complex ways in which they manage and negotiate their positionings in it.

In chapter nine, the authors return to some of the earlier debates through their analyses of the narratives. They draw on a version of discourse analysis that looks for common features of talk such as “extreme case formulation” or “norm breaching”. This is a form of discourse analysis that is popular but, in careless hands can make very large generalised claims about “how people talk” in ways that reintroduce the problems of other universal claims. However, the analysis is careful and sophisticated.

Returning then to the relational theory of violence, I felt that the structuring of the book did a disservice to this theoretical contribution. Because the theoretical approach is offered early in the book and is largely unlinked to the analysis of interviews or media representations, it comes across at times as if the authors are putting forward a new universal theory of violence – perhaps to rival Le Bon. Rather than considering how particular forms and understandings of violence are produced in the particular context of post apartheid South Africa, the general claims of the theory seemed a stretch too far and lacked the historical and locational specificity that would have made them more convincing.

Linked to this, I had some concerns about the decision to present very lengthy, thinly edited quotes as a strategy for “offer[ing] a ‘human’ face in listening to self-presentations from their own points of view” (p3). This seemed to risk a romanticisation of the original text as authentic and beyond critique in a way that was counter to the narrative and discursive frames from which the analysis stems. One risk of this style of presenting the texts is that it prevents a reflexive account of the co-production of the interviews.

Finally, I felt the book could have done more to develop the critique of the dichotomies that are raised in the early parts of the book. In particular the agency / victim dichotomy is not really resolved beyond offering a kind of middle ground between the two. The authors do not consider that presenting oneself as a victim of one’s social conditions is not necessarily an agentless position. This stems from the tendency to consider agency to be a property of the individual and the equivalent of “free will” outside of social life.

These are not simply critiques of the book but are ongoing conversations that all of us concerned with studying violence engage in. This book offers a unique and convincing contribution to these debates which, I have no doubt, will allow others to develop the analyses further. **The theatre of violence** is an important intervention to the field and should be required reading for those wanting to theorise violence in both academic and NGO sectors. It is accessible but nevertheless weaves a sophisticated narrative that is compelling to the end. It is, therefore, a book that is of value to those working in a range of sectors within and outside of academia and this is further testament to its value.