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Political violence and progressive academics

Book review
Manganyi, N C & du Toit (eds) (1990) **Political violence and the struggle in South Africa.** Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers.

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Political violence and the struggle in South Africa (hereafter PVSA) was initiated by the "Political violence and health resources project" at Wits who brought together a number of psychologists and academics interested in other areas - criminology, law, anthropology, media studies, sociology, philosophy and human rights.

PVSA is a collection of thirteen essays reflecting on academic and professional discourses during the "time of the comrades" - from about 1984 to 1988. The binding theme is "the personal and professional involvement" of the contributors. The focus is not so much on political violence itself, but rather the way it is understood, analysed, and indeed, legitimised through various professional and academic discourses.

The "time of the comrades" was an era in South African society characterised by intense polarisation, when the primary concern of progressives was to

oppose in a variety of ways the apartheid system. Few areas of civil society remained unaffected by the intense conflict of this era - least of all academic and professional interest groups. PVSA is reflective of the effects of the "time of the comrades" on professional and intellectual life.

The mid-1980s were also characterised by the need to make a clear moral choice. Progressive academics defined themselves as supportive of a voteless and oppressed majority, and searched for ways to make a relevant and meaningful contribution to the process of social change. The main interest of PVSA to psychologists is likely to be the "reflective" pieces on how "progressive psychologists" have taken up the issue of political violence. These address the nature of "prevailing psychological discourses" and their usefulness in relation to understanding political violence. The book also addresses the adequacy of clinical practice and engages with the use to which psychological expertise has been put in the South African courtroom.

Political violence is by its very nature best dealt with in a multi-disciplinary way. Every case and form of political violence has a particular history, occurs within particular political contexts and touches on specific power relations. Political violence may be collective, or it may be individual action imbued with collective significance. In South Africa's recent history, political violence has been on centre stage in the struggle between the nationalist state and the liberation movement. For this reason the range of perspectives in PVSA stand out as perhaps the books strongest feature. This review however focuses primarily on the psychological themes of PVSA, as well as discourses on political violence.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND PSYCHOLOGY.

Psychology has historically been quite limited in the contribution it has made to an understanding of political violence. The central reason is the narrow focus of psychology in the context of a phenomenon which clearly involves far more than internal psychological factors.

The implications of the particular focus of psychology is taken up in chapters 7, 8 and 9. Don Foster and Donald Skinner examine "victimology" and other discourses around detention while Leslie Swartz, Kerry Gibson and Sally Swartz reflect on the emergence of a progressive psychology in the context of state violence. The "discourse of damaging effects" in relation to children is dealt with in chapter 9 by Leslie Swartz and Ann Levett. These chapters deal with several common themes, albeit in slightly differing contexts. All three chapters show how the narrow focus of psychology manifests itself in an almost exclusive focus on the result of violence, in the form of psychological sequelae or "damage" caused. The primary concern with violence as a cause

of pathology or damage is linked in PVSA to a more general critique of positivist, or "mainstream" academic psychology, and reflects arguments previously presented in **Psychology in society**. Mainstream academic psychology has characteristically presented itself as neutral, objective and scientific; whilst at the same time remaining aloof from the political conflict around it, or indeed the political implications of its work. The "establishment" within psychology has thus largely avoided engaging with the issues thrown up by apartheid and political conflict in South African society.

But what of "Progressive psychology" which has defined itself primarily in opposition to the mainstream tradition in psychology? How has "progressive psychology" actually responded to the challenge of political violence? Has the approach of progressive psychology been substantially different from that of the "establishment" in opposition to which it is defined; and what has been the effect of the context (the time of the comrades) on the practice and theory of progressive psychology itself? It is in reflecting on these questions that the three chapters - particularly the contribution by Leslie Swartz, Kerry Gibson and Sally Swartz - are most interesting.

THE DISCOURSE OF STRESS.

Swartz, Gibson and Swartz argue that the question of the focus and methodology of psychology is centrally tied up to the "discourse of stress" and the notion of the "victim". Both mainstream and progressive psychology have relied heavily on the linear cause and effect model of stress, in attempting to explain the symptoms and effects of violence. This dominant model of stress, is however based on an asocial and decontextualised view of the individual. The assumption of the intentional individual as the basic unit of society and as the agent of social processes serves to limit consideration of social, political and historical factors in relation to political violence. This conception, they argue, has the subtle effect of individualising the experience and naturalising the social and political significance of violence.

The central problem with the linear stress model in the context of political violence is the "inevitable implication of this model that the stressor itself is of far less concern to psychologists than individual psychopathological responses". While criticising these "linear" notions of psychopathology, all three chapters admit to their utility in the context of state repression. These models offer widely accepted frameworks to demonstrate the negative effects of specific stressors and were thus functional in providing persuasive ammunition highlighting the "bad" aspects of the apartheid state. But as Swartz and Levett argue in relation to children, the metaphor of innocence and notions of passivity and helplessness, are in important ways misleading and problematic. A similar theme is developed by Foster and Skinner in

relation to detainees. They conclude by saying that the psychological discourse that has developed around the effects of detention "offers at best a partial and limited view of detention".

The other issues which are taken up in this reflective exercise relate to issues of power; criteria for the production of knowledge; and the pervasive issue of political "credibility".

POWER.

Swartz, Gibson and Swartz discuss the ways in which progressive psychology has attempted to avoid the conventional power relations within the therapeutic encounter. This search for a new relationship has proved difficult because of what they describe as: "the ambiguous situation implied by the dual notions of victim and of empowerment". This search for a new "empowering" relationship between psychologist and "client" has occurred largely within what is described as a "vacuum of information and research". The approaches described, such as the "democratisation of clinical practice", involve being aware of the power dynamics brought into the therapeutic encounter from the existing social order outside. Swartz et al argue that such concerns for greater "self-consciousness" on the part of the psychologists are no different from the concerns within mainstream clinical psychology and suggest that the issues of the criteria for the production of psychological knowledge are in fact more important.

The examination of these issues illustrates how the need for political "credibility" became perhaps the single most important criteria for successful research. This "credibility" in the context of political struggle and the criteria inherent to mainstream academia became, in a sense, conflicting sets of criteria for the production of psychological knowledge.

The concerns expressed by Swartz, Gibson and Swartz are firstly that this reliance on credibility may in fact effectively rule out debate on the merits of different approaches, or the validity of findings. Second is the absence of a well developed set of criteria for psychological knowledge within the paradigm of "progressive psychology", which differs in meaningful ways from the criteria used in mainstream academia. Seen from another angle the discourse of progressive psychology has developed primarily as an "anti-code" to mainstream psychology in the context of political struggle.

More broadly the chapters suggest quite fundamental questions about the nature of psychological intervention in the context of social conflict - which they do not really pursue. Perhaps the question that needs to be asked is: can psychology stand on its own as a distinct profession, given the need to be an

expert in social process and societal power relations in order to fashion the non-problematic psychological intervention? Or as is posed in PVSA: "what then defines mental health workers in the context of political violence, when the term (even in more progressive formulations) implies a focus on the individual?" In general the pieces are suggestive of the need for a psychological theory and practice which is more fundamentally social than those currently in use in the South African context. Concrete steps are taken in this direction by Foster and Skinner, who argue for a conception of the detention process which integrates a theory of intergroup relations.

TOWARDS A (MORE) SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

Despite its name, "social psychology" has not historically played much of a role in examining and explaining social processes underlying political violence. This is due to the fact that like mainstream psychology it has been characterised by a conception of the "social" and the "individual" as separate domains, with the individual being given primacy as a source of social behaviour. Society-individual dualism in psychology is perhaps the core issue underlying the critiques of conventional psychology mentioned. After all it is the liberal humanist notion of the individual as an autonomous rational agent, which is one of the basic conceptual building blocks on which positivist psychological "science" is based.

A central theme throughout PVSA is that political violence is distinguished from other forms of violence by the specific social meaning or symbolic significance attached to it by groups of people. This includes a process of legitimation for the injury and harm done on the one hand, and the representative character of the agents and targets of political violence on the other. Political violence is thus mediated by the specific intergroup discourse within which it occurs. This is perhaps the central reason for the conceptual weakness of many of the psychological models which attempt to understand the psychological process associated with being a "victim" of political violence.

The notion of political violence as an intergroup encounter is taken up by Foster and Skinner as well as Manganyi in relation to the detention experience and crowd action respectively. Social Identity Theory (as developed by Tajfel and Turner) seems to offer some potential as a model which helps explain many of the observable features of the process of political violence. Of course the origin of social identity theory is also to be found within an individualist and positivist psychological tradition, but in its developed form it may succeed in transcending a dualistic conception of social processes and thus provide a workable conceptual framework for grappling with political violence.

Manganyi's account of crowd action constitutes a response to individualist discourses or "neo-classical theory" (such as de-individuation theory) which have been widely used in expert evidence to attempt to explain the process leading to crowd violence - preferably in terms favourable to the individual accused. Manganyi suggests that the behaviour of the crowd needs to be re-theorised in line with a greater integration of the notions of "individual" and "society". We can thus conceptualise crowd behaviour in political contexts as primarily an intergroup phenomenon. Manganyi draws extensively on Reicher who argues in **Crowd behaviour as social action** that: "The evidence suggests that crowd events are uniquely social: they allow a glimpse of people's social understanding of themselves and their social world that is hidden among the concerns of everyday life".

This is contrasted with the conventional decontextualised view of crowd behaviour: "If the outgroup is ignored, violence cannot be understood as arising from a process of intergroup conflict. Instead it is attributed to the crowd itself. Thus the forms of nineteenth century class struggle are translated into generic characteristics of the crowd: the crowd is violent, it is destructive, it is pathological". Reicher suggests that social identity theory be harnessed in providing a more fully social account of crowd behaviour and that crowd violence be understood as social action. This is preferable to the social psychology in which the "social is all but absent and which is shamelessly ahistorical".

Manganyi thus suggests that de-individuation is a secondary manifestation of a more complex social reality - it is made possible because of the heightening of social identities.

DISCOURSES ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE.

du Toit conducts an in-depth examination of the nature of discourses on political violence. This discussion is instructive in relation to the psychological discourses on violence discussed above. The discussion has as its starting point the assertion that discourses on violence are unavoidably in the business of distinguishing legitimate violence from illegitimate violence - and du Toit seeks to examine the underlying reasons for this. Whether the discourses on violence are legitimist or claim to be neutral they tend to incorporate legitimist conceptions of violence into the very definition of violence itself. Thus, for example, some discourses invoke a definitional bias which implies that violence by the state is not violence at all.

du Toit outlines his project as "the development of a coherent and critical discourse on political violence, which would enable us to distinguish between

legitimate and illegitimate using generally well founded criteria in internally consistent ways". This search leads him to a discussion of the work of David Apter, which seems particularly relevant to the present situation in South Africa. Apter is concerned with "violence as a post-modern condition" and suggests that discourses of development, which claim to be scientific are nevertheless unable to satisfactorily account for the phenomenon of social marginalisation and violence. This phenomenon is apparently common to both first and third world contexts and involves increasing "polarisation, marginalisation, functional displacement, dispossession and with them a growing predisposition to violence in advanced industrial systems".

du Toit also briefly considers the notion of violence as discourse but does not pursue this line of thought. However if political violence is inevitably connected to a process of legitimating violence then the notion of violence as a discursive practice might have borne more consideration by du Toit. Indeed several other contributions in PVSA frame political violence as part of an intergroup discourse. At a number of points reference is made to the meaning and symbolism of political violence, as well as the representative character of the perpetrators and victims of such violence. It appears that it might be fruitful to explore the notion of political violence as a component of an intergroup discourse, thus examining its function in a way which does not get caught up in legitimist disputes.

Such a framework could also be extended to encompass phenomena which are not ordinarily viewed as political violence such as rape and domestic violence. While these types of violence differ significantly from collective violence in "political" contexts the common features and social implications suggest that there is a strong case for considering them as political violence. Such a discourse would no doubt serve to pose important questions in relation to the "treatment" of rape victims and the "individualisation" of the problem which is inherent to psychological discourses around rape, and which it could be argued serve to divert attention from the root causes of rape.

THE "NEW SOUTH AFRICA" AND THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE.

South Africa has changed in important ways since PVSA was written - inevitably giving the book a certain historical feel to it. The rapid political changes did not result in a decrease in political violence but rather changes in the nature of the conflicts in society. What are the implications of these changes for the study of violence?

It seems that the main feature of the post-February 1990 period has been a change in the nature of polarisation, with polar centres of power being replaced to a certain extent by uncertainty as a major factor in conflict.

Forms of conflict have become more complicated than the "us and them" of the time of the comrades. Professionals can no longer expect that large scale social change will bring an end to the dominant forms of violence. More so than "during the time of the comrades" it is clear that we need information about the conflicts which have surfaced as the bipolar conflict between oppressor and liberation movement has been channelled into negotiation and the arena of formal political competition.

These forms of conflict have reminded us how little we know of the lives and fears of many identifiable groups of South Africans, whom the years of apartheid have in a sense hidden from the concerns of committed academics. In the uncertainty of the violent outbreaks of the 1990s there is an urgent need to grapple with and understand the meaning of a range of intergroup conflicts - particularly those involving seemingly marginalised but powerful groupings such as hostel dwellers, white right-wingers and so on.

This transitional period has also opened up a whole host of new possibilities. The transition to a new democratic order involves a large number of complex transitional hurdles which relate to violence in that they involve the institutionalisation of forms of intergroup conflict and competition. Peace agreements, negotiation, facilitation, new forms of community based justice are all areas which come to mind. In addition we are faced with the enormous challenge of institutional change in key areas of society. On obvious case is that of the police force, which clearly requires substantial policy reformulation, re-training and a change of police culture and leadership in order to play a constructive role in relation to the maintenance of a newly negotiated social accord.

The reduction of polarisation at a political level may also have other challenging implications for the academic community. In a sense the harsh reality of the "time of the comrades" heightened critical awareness of the implications of certain professional and academic discourses. Will the more diffuse power relations of the new South Africa mean that critical reflection on the implications of such discourses becomes more difficult? The change in the political landscape has no doubt already reduced the need for political credibility. In fact many groups involved in research and monitoring of political violence have been grappling with the difficult process of "being politically independent". This new "set of criteria" is likely to have the effect of blurring the lines between "conventional" and "progressive" discourses, thus making it more difficult for groups like "progressive psychologists" to maintain a meaningful role and identity.

In conclusion I think that there are two more issues which the reading of PVSA raised for me, and which seem important for anyone who wants to contribute to the field:

1. How is the information about the way we think about violence communicated, and to whom?
2. What is the effect of "professional" pronunciations about violence on the actors themselves? Does academic discourse not tend to feed into the discourse of intergroup conflict in particular and important ways?