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Youth and political violence

Book review

Straker, G with Moosa, M, Becker, R, & Nkwale, M (1992) **Faces in the revolution: The psychological effects of violence on township youth in South Africa.** Cape Town: David Philip, ISBN 0-86486-203-2. Ohio: Ohio University Press, ISBN 0-8214-1040-7.

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Much of the psychological literature on political violence has tended to tell us more about the ways in which psychiatrists and psychologists categorise, code and evaluate the responses of the victims than about the people who are actively living through, making sense of and fighting against these things. Straker et al's **Faces in the Revolution** has managed the much more difficult task of transmitting something of the psychological complexity of the lived experience of youth during the repression of the 1980s.

The book can be read at two different levels: firstly as the story of South African youth in revolutionary times, and secondly as a psychological analysis of the effects of their exposure to violence. I read it initially as a narrative. At this level it describes a community, Leandra: a microcosm of township life in the mid-eighties. The same threads of discontent that ignited townships across South Africa led to its own resistance against the State. The threat of forced removal, poverty, housing shortages and dissatisfaction with

schooling, as in many other areas, became the grass-roots basis of "struggle" which was initiated largely by the youth. Also as in other townships, splits developed between those who clung desperately to their meagre power under the status quo and those who sought change. This created an atmosphere of suspicion and outbreaks of internal aggression which in turn were exploited and fuelled by the State in a campaign of increasing repression against the resistors. The comrades whose stories are the basis of this book were forced to flee the township after the conflict exploded in the murder of a community leader and a revenge killing of a vigilante. The Wilgespruit Centre where the group were first interviewed, was only a nominal refuge from the violence. Relations there (including those between the subjects and counsellors/researchers) mirror the political divisions, hostility and suspicion of the revolutionary environment. In addition, the centre itself was targeted for police harassment and offered no real measure of safety for the displaced youth who had fled there.

The first stated intention of the **Faces in the Revolution** is to contextualise the diversity of trauma arising out of repression. While it might appear glaringly obvious that it is necessary to understand this context in order to understand the ways in which people have responded, it is surprising how often in the psychological literature this has been accorded less significance than it deserves. In the interests of research clarity there has been a tendency to oversimplify the context of political violence by splitting it up into discrete events which are coded according to objective characteristics. While ostensibly this appears to reflect the context, it does not capture the way in which the events stand in a meaningful relation to one another or how they are given meaning by those experiencing them. The approach in this book does not make the pretence at reducing violence to a set of events, nor does it treat these as having a discrete impact on people's responses. Instead, to its credit, it recognises how people are entrenched in particular ways of making meaning out of their environment and how they constantly interact with their environment in ways which alter it and transform themselves.

This contextual back-grounding provides a solid basis for the discussion of 300 hours of interviews with politically active youth. This coincides with the second intention of the book which is to explore in depth the personalities and lives of those interviewed. It is illustrated throughout by rich case material which has actually managed to evade the psychiatric "case presentation" stereotyping often present in psychological literature. The authors are able to sketch a very real sense of each person and as I read it for the first time I found it had been capable of eliciting a whole range of emotional responses: hopes and fears, in relation to the material. While this is obviously not the primary task of an academic text, there is still a great deal to be said for a

text that is able to connect readers on this level. **Not either an experimental doll** (Marks, 1989) comes to mind as an example of a heart rending book that has done more to develop an understanding of the history of education in South Africa than many other weightier academic tomes. I must confess to a little disappointment when I read the methodology section at the back of the book and discovered that the very convincing case studies had in fact been constructed by the authors as an illustration of a `type'. Nevertheless it is clear that the book succeeds well as narrative. The material is rich, accessible and emotionally convincing.

These things however are not all that is required of a psychological text on political violence and certainly the authors intend that it should also be a rigorous psychological analysis of the characters and contexts they describe. Two intentions are specifically outlined in this respect: to examine the vulnerability and resilience of youth in war and finally to critically examine the psychological basis of the popular claim that violence begets violence. Both of these aims address the interests of the specialist reader. The first question deals with issues which are widely accepted to be a part of the domain of psychological theorising on the issue of stress. The second aim adds a level of critique to the analysis. This is not just directed at common sense thinking but also on the widely held psychological thesis that violence must necessarily be pathogenic and frequently results in a cycle of aggression where those who are victimised become victimisers.

My second reading was undertaken with more attention to these theoretical concerns. The authors work with a broad distinction between those who cope with their experience of repression (are resilient) and those who do not (are vulnerable) and within this they describe a range of possible roles that those in the "struggle" might enact: the leader, the hero in search of a script, the conduit, the follower, and so on. Each sub-category is exemplified with one or more case studies which are in turn analysed to extract features of vulnerability or reliance. The case study method used here was effective in reflecting the complexity of factors involved in coping: the person's background, the degree of social support they receive, family relationships, previous experiences, personality styles and so on. The cases demonstrated how particular responses emerged out of a subtle interaction of all of these factors rather than as the necessary corollary of any one. Even beyond this the broad roles in terms of which the cases were defined were also recognised to fluctuate. Although this kind of idea has been discussed fairly extensively in the literature on political violence, the attempt to avoid over-simplification is sometimes difficult to follow through successfully in the analysis of actual case material. In trying to account for the complexity of relationships between the many different kinds of factors in the experience of violence it is a

challenge not to resort to a wishy-washy brand of eclecticism. While the over-all theoretical foundation of this book is clearly psychodynamic, there is still some lack of coherence between the different ideas that emerge from within the varied ranks of this body of theory. It is recognised for example in some of the case analyses that constitutional factors may play a part in responses to violence, that early loss might be a significant dynamic factor and that social support can bolster a failing ego. All of these make sense independently (in more or less sophisticated ways) but the problem is that all of these factors engage at different analytic levels. The authors do not give an adequate explanation for how these different levels relate to one another nor for how they might be integrated into a unifying theoretical understanding. This lack of theoretical coherence gave a slightly confused and piecemeal quality to the case analyses that might have been avoided by the inclusion of an earlier chapter which explained the theoretical basis of the analysis more rigorously.

In spite of this shortcoming however, the book takes us substantially beyond a reductionistic, one-dimensional consideration of the psychological effects of political violence and gives a tantalising glimpse of how things might be understood differently. In particular, it allows us to break away from the image of the passive victim of a violent event to a recognition of agency in the process of coping with and making sense of experiences of violence. The authors note that while 50% of their study group could be described as psychological "casualties", what was remarkable was that the other 50% had survived. On a less positive note however the study raised some illuminating questions about what in fact constitutes real coping and whether showing little sign of psychological disturbance may itself not be pathological in the long term. The argument here becomes a potentially very powerful critique of other research on the psychological effects of violence which has tended to equate symptoms with pathology and lack of symptomatology with health.

The last section of the book deals with the question of whether violence begets violence. In order to do this it offers an account of the actions of the youth while at the Wilgespruit Centre as well as their moral perceptions of violence obtained in interviews some three years later. It also draws from material obtained in interviews with other subjects who participated in violent incidents (necklacing), but who were not a part of the Leandra group. This particular question is one which is voiced over and over again in popular forums, but has seldom been addressed directly in the psychological literature on violence. Its neglect is, I believe, not mere coincidence, but reflects some degree of reluctance on the part of researchers to move away from the comforting image of the child victim of violence, to an investigation of the active perpetrator of violence. This is perhaps due to both the political

sensitivity of questions around the morality of involvement in violence as well concerns about the possibility of pathologising the warriors of the "struggle". That these authors have been able to walk all over this previously sacred ground might be attributed to changing political circumstances which have allowed greater dissension within the progressive circles, but remains nevertheless a courageous development on the part of the authors.

Essentially, the argument of the book is that participation in violence does not seem to lead inevitably to moral decay and further random acts of violence. Instead, violence appears to be contained within an over-riding set of moral justifications for violence which is seen to be serving particular kinds of just ends. At the same time however the authors caution against a Fanonesque view of violence as healing the wounds of repression (1963). While they argue that there is no evidence to suggest that the youth in their study had become amoral or insensitive there was no reason to suggest that their participation in violence had been helpful to them on a psychological level. Thus, the authors offer a challenge to two common sense visions of the effects of violence, the first which envisages violence as a step on the road to inevitable moral decay and the second which romanticises the violence of war.

This is by far the most interesting section of the book. It raises a whole range of theoretically exciting ideas as well as practical questions which are becoming more and more pertinent as political violence continues in our country. It starts to open up a very important area in terms of understanding the long term effects of violence. This is however just a start. As much as the ideas contain the germs of a whole range of possible psychological ideas, they remain largely at the level of illuminating speculations rather than well based conclusions. There is also, as previously, a slight unevenness in the quality of the analysis which varies from extremely sophisticated ideas to ones that appear to be relatively simplistic. In spite of this however there is a quality of insight within these speculations that is a powerful introduction into a new set of questions about violence. Perhaps it is appropriate that at this point in the development of psychological knowledge on violence there should be a focus on opening up questions and debates rather that providing answers.

REFERENCES.

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