



Confused About Violence? Try Structure

A Review of

The Hidden Structure of Violence: Who Benefits From Global Violence and War

by Marc Pilisuk and Jennifer Achord Rountree

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Drones. Smart bombs. Chemical weapons. White phosphorus. Improvised explosive devices. Thermal imagers. Mark 77. Napalm. 9/11. WMD. Saddam. The evil axis. Collateral damage. Halliburton. Embedded journalism. Abu Ghraib. Waterboarding. Taliban. Enhanced soldiers. Wikileaks. School of Americas. Manning. Libya. Gitmo. Syria. Snowden. ISIS/ISIL. Famine. Mass migration. Climate change.

It is difficult for the layperson to recognize all these terms and events, let alone connect the concepts to the political, economic, and social world around them. Almost 25 years after the end of the Cold War, militarism is still widespread and people, at least those who are not part of the elite, find the world more confusing than ever. The “peace dividend,” the money that could be used for common good if so much were not spent on war, has been painfully and persistently reduced—and the hopes for it have all but disappeared. As vast amounts of money are spent on weapons, less and less is left for education, health, and other services. Fiscal austerity is imposed on the public across the world. Austerity requires tightening the government’s belt, preventing it from paying for public services, but it is all but disregarded when it comes to weapon purchases.

Fortunately, in *The Hidden Structure of Violence: Who Benefits From Global Violence and War*, Marc Pilisuk and Jennifer Achord Rountree have produced a book that connects the dots. The authors note that war and most types of violence are easily recognizable, but vital, underlying patterns are often less obvious: “Violence is not adequately understood by the examination of occurrences of specific violent behavior” (p. 80)—and thus the need for a sophisticated psychological approach. “Structure” is what helps connect the dots—and the facts. The hidden structure of violence provides the very structure needed to link the above concepts, and the many more like them, in historical and political terms.

More Relevant Now Than Ever

From start to finish, the book is full of gems. It might be tempting to jump from one gem to another, but this book gains even more relevance and urgency given the attacks in Paris, which have generated vast confusion in Europe and elsewhere. Following the attacks on November 13th, 2015, a familiar scenario has been played out. François Hollande, the president of the Republic of France, went on television, declared a state of emergency, and immediately called the attacks “an act of war.” He vowed the response would be “ruthless.” The president said “France will not let itself be overwhelmed or frightened even if today we are overcome with sadness and emotion.”

With this speech, he declared war on an ill-defined enemy. The parliament rushed to confirm the state of emergency, granting the state expanded police powers. Civil liberties were suddenly pushed back as if they had been a luxury. Anti-Muslim sentiments multiplied. Refugees suddenly became usual suspects. In a few days, thousands of young French people flocked to sign up with the military, wanting to kill in order to defend “liberty,” “their country,” and to “fight against terror.” Flags were put on display everywhere. It is hard not to recognize the familiarity of these events.

The surge in militarism in France mirrors, in many ways, what happened in the United States after the September 11th attacks in 2001. Only 2 years after 9/11, the number of active-duty personnel in the United States rose to almost 1.5 million. The young enlisted to defend “America,” “their way of life,” and, of course, to “fight terrorists.”

Random or Systematic?

For those who study violence, it is always challenging to connect facts and events across levels. Pilisuk and Rountree do an extraordinary job providing convincing examples that illustrate how what seem to be daily, random, irrational acts of violence are related to a structure, what most would like to call “structural violence.” The authors trace a stabbing death in Toronto, for instance, back to events in the Dominican Republic, and they demonstrate how a chain of events can lead to violent deaths in seemingly far-away lands (p. 85). The book illustrates how proximal and distal causes operate together to create not only occasional sequences of events, but chronic forms of violence. In this way, the authors are able to support their thesis that “the hidden force underlying increasingly frequent occurrences of contemporary violence is the global corporate economy” (p. 84).

A decade ago, Paul Duckett (2005) invited scholars to look more closely into violence, war, and other events that lead to loss of life on massive scales. He argued that many of these events were portrayed as “accidents,” despite their persistent and systematic nature. Portraying structural violence as “industrial accidents,” “natural disasters,” etc., the events become de-politicized and therefore more palatable for the public to accept.

Just like preventable industrial deaths, the deaths of Iraqi civilians in Iraq were often introduced as accidents. The events were unintended, and they were described as “collateral damage.” The facts told another story. Civilians died in large numbers, and there were even more deaths after the invasion, almost half of which were women and children. The

Pentagon and Downing Street's equivalent found these facts inconvenient, while major media sources around the world had no difficulty ignoring them altogether.

Duckett also pointed out that wars have massively damaging psychological effects on individuals, families, and whole communities. The experience of war is a life-changing sequence of events. Civilians, as well as soldiers, experience severe, long-lived, and change-resistant psychological disturbances. The psychological consequences of war for human beings are too vast to calculate. In Chapter 1, Pilisuk and Rountree provide a host of evidence that supports Duckett's claims.

Globalized Violence

If wars are so costly and so bad, why are they not already extinct? Or, could wars be historical accidents? Pilisuk and Rountree provide a firm answer: "Wars are not accidents. They are products of a social order that plans for them and then accepts this planning as natural" (p. 54). And, wars are entirely preventable: "The system that sustains war and other forms of global violence is the system that will have to change if we are to stop the massive killing involved both in war and in economic exploitation" (p. 54).

Pilisuk and Rountree further argue that wars today are

- a) not necessarily fought between nation states, b) most likely fought over control of resources, c) more likely than before to kill civilians in large numbers and to involve widespread violations of human rights, d) more likely to involve the use of weapons that can irreversibly alter the opportunity for continued life on the planet, and e) weapons are more likely to be supplied by corporations that are international weapon specialists. (p. 19)

The Role of Psychologists

A book that cuts across levels of analysis and attempts to connect a large number of facts often risks losing sufficient psychological examinations. Above all, *The Hidden Structure of Violence* offers a psychologically sophisticated analysis of violence, ideal for curious lay readers and students. Just as the drums of war are once again playing, it would be wonderful to assign college students this book along with the classic *Violence, Aggression, and Coercive Actions* (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). It would also be good to add a bold and comprehensive analysis that focuses on the cost of war, such as *The Three Trillion Dollar War* (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008), and then to ask that the students begin to chart a responsible course of action. It is now more important than ever for psychology students and psychologists to rethink how war mongering can be stopped.

It might be fair to say that Pilisuk and Rountree's analysis of violence provides yet another reason for mainstream psychologists in the United States and elsewhere to reconsider the role psychology plays in globalized violence. The *Hoffman Report*, which was commissioned by the American Psychological Association (APA) and released in July 2015, portrays the relationship between the military establishment in the United States and APA, the most powerful professional association in psychology, as follows: "In some ways, DoD

[Department of Defense] is like a rich, powerful uncle to APA, helping it in important ways throughout APA's life. Acting independently of a benefactor like this is difficult" (p. 72).

In this context, it is worth remembering Pilisuk and Rountree's warning:

The study of violent conflict confronts us repeatedly with frightening facts. We gain power by considering our painful awareness as an important step in a process of change. If we choose to ignore these facts, the facts will return to haunt us. (p. 54)

Psychologists have to be very clear as to where they stand when it comes to human rights and globalized violence.

References

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