Violence Workers. By Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Phillip G. Zimbardo

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Violence Workers is a timely publication for an era when political violence is rampant and acts of destruction are hailed as precursors of international peace and harmony. The eleven chapters and the conclusion in this book go a long way to expand our horizon on the dynamics of the state-sanctioned violence. Although, the book’s research focus is on police torture and murder in Brazil, implications of the findings transcend all territorial and disciplinary boundaries bringing us face to face with a form of violence that lives in the heart of civilization and feeds on ideological rhetoric.

The work begins with the most pertinent questions that should be raised in any analysis of political violence: “How do violence workers manage their secrets about atrocity? How do they account for, explain, and excuse violence work? How do secrecy, training, ideology, and organizational insularity interact to shape, promote, and support violent conduct? How does work in repression create personal and public identities? What physical and psychological impact does violence work have on its perpetrators?” (p. 7). With respect to organization process, diffusion of responsibility, and relative involvement of all actors in acts of atrocities, the authors repeatedly ask: “To what extent are the police who carry out extreme violence is essentially different from those who do not? What role in such violence does those members of a police unit who are less immediately involved play? How do a police unit’s immediate supervisors contribute to its violence? What role do political and high-level police officials play in fostering police violence? What role do violence facilitators—colleagues, supervisors, and officials—who ignore, excuse, support or even reward it?"

In explaining the dynamics of state-sanctioned terrorism, the authors go beyond the typical etiological schemes that attribute violence either to unique personalities or to unique societies or cultures. They see little value in either the psychobiological or in cultural deterministic perspectives. However, the authors own perspectives at times come across as one of situational determinism.

The book’s strength is in bringing together many empirical and theoretical bases of political violence. They show how members of the special units in Brazilian police who perpetrated some of the most egregious barbarities for the state were not initially different social and psychologically from the rest of the force. Rather than blaming a particular personality disposition for state-sanctioned atrocities, the authors try to delineate the working of a complex set of historical, political, sociological, and organizational processes.

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This is an empirical work based on in-depth interviews with many police officers and governmental agents who had engaged in torture and murder. Given the complexity of obtaining data on self-reported acts of violence, the authors of this work ought to be congratulated for their fine research. Locating and interviewing atrocity perpetrators are not easy tasks. As the authors point out, this is the first systematic study those who had been involved in torture and murder as part of their routinized professional work.

Contrary to much descriptive and ethnographic research, this qualitative inquiry is also replete with theoretical insights. Social psychological, situational, organizational and cultural perspectives all nicely come together in this book. Much of the bureaucratization of violence is traced to a culture of masculinity that provides a normative background for the definition of rational conduct within an organization. The authors succeed in showing how violent workers by losing their human agency and their place in a network of emotional relationship become simply a functional component of an organization. They become violence “organization men.”

Reconstructing the professional careers of many violence workers, the authors locate the seed of political violence not in the pathological personality but in the atrocity environments. A common denominator of “atrocity environments” both in Brazil and the United States is a sociopolitical climate that designates a segment of population as “enemies of the state.” This then gives the police a license for performing all sorts of brutalities in the name the nation. Like Nazi doctors, violence workers resort to various defensive strategies to neutralize their conscience such as: “1) diffusing responsibility... 2) portraying perpetrators as uniquely bad apples... 3) demonizing their victims... 4) advancing a just cause to explain their violence... 5) cloaking violence in professional and organization mandates...” (p.59). Here this book picks up perfectly the spirit of our time in this country when republican candidates compete with one another in how they would continue to deprive “bad dudes” of their civil and human rights by defining them as “enemy combatants” and by kidnaping them, torturing them and keeping them in cages at Guantanamo Bay—in violation of all principles of international law—all in the name of an ideology that is supposed to “make America great again.”

Following Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth and Aldo Martin in his study the impact of torture on the personality of torturers, the authors of Violence Workers look at the occupational burnout of political violence and murder. They show how violence turns back on the perpetrators by affecting their own emotional and physical health.

Similar to the classic works of Stanley Milgram on Obedience and Authority and Phillip Zimbardo on Stanford Prison Experiment, the reader of Violence Workers cannot escape the conclusion that he or she is capable of committing all kind of atrocities. The authors have succeeded in making a strong case for the “banality of evil.” They show how prior to their indoctrination into a violence-sanctioning system, most of the violence workers were “ordinary” people. Rather than prior disposition to violence, it is the working of organizational forces that set the workers up for violent actions. The transformations in values, attitudes, perceptions and lifestyles of many of the violence workers described in this book are shown to be clearly the product of a complex network of historical, political, sociological, and psychological processes.

This book provides a strong case for situational explanation. It is hard to disagree with the authors' interpretations and conclusions. Yet, with all its explanatory elegance, this analysis remains on a micro level—albeit the unit of analysis is the situation rather than the person.

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2 For a methodological critique of Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment see Banuazizi and Movahedi (1975) and Movahedi and Banuazizi (1975).
But don’t we need to account for the recurring pattern of human situations that elicit the worse in us, desensitize us to the pain of violence and shape us into actors who come to play our destructive roles with moral justifications and even with pride? It is true that the situation of war makes the most decent person into a ruthless killing machine, but shouldn’t we account for the repeated pattern of wars and aggression on the part of some groups or some nations? It has been argued that once atrocity contexts are permitted to function in surreptitious civil or military policing operations, extreme forms of abuse follow almost automatically. We have no qualm with the dynamics of the atrocity context. But don’t we need to explain the emergence of atrocity contexts”? The authors do direct our attention to the role that the Untied States has played formally and informally in facilitating and promoting atrocity and fascist governments (p. 235).” But what does explain the policies of the United States? Isn’t the invasion of Iraq creation of another atrocity context? We have no problem explaining the behavior of marines, soldiers or commanders in the situation of war. But how should we account for the behavior of architects of atrocity contexts or wars? Is an atrocity context itself a function of another atrocity context ad infinitum? Don’t we need some other explanatory hypotheses to explain the conducts of the atrocity contexts’ chief architects?

My last commentary is by no means to be interpreted as a criticism of this work. There is much that is informative and evocative in this book. Although it does focus on the dark side of the human political conduct, the book is well written, interesting and a pleasure to read. I would recommend it highly for any social scientist or practitioner who, as the authors put it, is ready to transcend the simple minded dispositional theories of violence.

References
