

It's too dark in here

Book review

Bornman, E, van Eeden, R & Wentzel M (eds) (1998) **Violence in South Africa: A variety of perspectives**. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council . ISBN 0-07969-1858-9. 457 pages

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We are not out of the woods yet. With a bit of good luck, and a lot of work, it might be a few years before we reach the (high) road. Here is some work; as for luck — well, we'll keep working. And, true, we had good warning. Decolonisation, they said, is an historical phenomenon. Decolonisation, they told us, spells violence (Fanon, 1967) — for what we are experiencing in varying guises is an uneven process of decolonisation. Bornman, van Eeden and Wentzel's collection of articles is then one other effort to unravel the historical, social, biological, political and relational aspects of the phenomenon of violence, and, whether consciously or unawares, to look into the processes which have been called national liberation, post-apartheid, African renaissance, or reconciliation, but which always are historical and thus about colonisation. Thus, in bringing together a group of young and experienced scholars and researchers from a variety of disciplines, institutional locations, and theoretical positions to bear on what has gone before in South African between the 1960s and 1997, and the book is attempt to venture not only on how we got here but also on the future of that history.

In the opening chapter, which also gives some definitions of constructs central to the project, the editors inform us of the purpose of the book and the question underlying it. The questions relate to the nature and prevalence of violence in our country; violence as a mechanism to resolving problems; the dynamics of forms of violence, the association of crime to brutality; factors which contributing to violence and how we address them as a society; and possible solutions. It is in trying to move beyond the frame of socio-political systems to a gesture, however small a move, towards the gaps around the meso, interpersonal, and micro conflictual moments as well the relationships between large processes and the more immediate processes that this contribution is welcome.

The book is divided into three sections around themes, more or less. First is the more overtly political and large societal conflicts; this is followed by the little less socio-political and more individualised violent moments; last comes three contributions on violence prevention.

Chapters 2-9 are then overtly concerned with politics. The authors level their attempts at the structural, collective, and political violence between the 1970s to the middle of the 1990s. For example the chapter by de Kock and Schutte, researchers at the HSRC, offer a number of explanations of political violence. They focus on reasons behind direct action turning into physical violence where the goal is attainment or redistribution of political power. Bornman's contribution is on social identity and its relationship with violence. Using mostly the findings of Tajfel and his associates presented in the 1970s and 80s on social categorisation, comparison and identity, she views the group membership has significant consequences on personal behaviour and political processes.

Chapters 10-12 look at South African research has found relating to causal factors of violence. They are mainly focussed at the individual and interpersonal and cultural contexts. Olivier and her associates respond to the question of violence and the individual from the view of psychiatric and personality factors. Botha, who has done work around the media since his days the Council, looks at evidence from a number of longitudinal studies from the North-European countries and locally on the effect of violence on television on children viewers.

The last section of the book turns to strategies for intervention and prevention. Authors discuss the factors behind the continuing cycles of violence but also the possibility of violence free society. Pushing a public health approach to violence, staff of the Health Psychology Unit at the University of South Africa, draw attention to the magnitude of the problem and the difficulties which dog traditional strategies to dealing with it.

On a critical note though, let us take a look at a few contributions, two which may be regarded as strong in many respects, and another not. Although Bornman's chapter is in fact one of the interesting ones, and though she ends the chapter by considering the possible prevention strategies to group determined violence, one is likely to feel a little disappointment for one or two reasons from reading. One of these is she stops too soon in her examination of theory. There has been considerable improvements, or criticisms, in the last decade on social identity theory such as by Michael Billig, who worked with Tajfel on those early experiments. This would add depth to her contribution. There is then the little matter of broken promise while there is promise by Bornman and her co-editors in the first chapter that her contribution will consider multiculturalism as strategy to prevent conflict and violence she only has one bland line to this effect: "A policy of multiculturalism is usually embraced to promote diversity to guarantee the cultural rights of groups and to ensure equal opportunities" (p110).

Chapter 6 is an attempt to explore insider views of necklacing, whose individual spin-offs, outside of some of the stories at the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Hearings, many communities, perhaps all of us might need to confront, one way or another. The practice of necklacing was an act so absolutely brutal and morally repugnant that any serious attempt to comprehend it is to be encouraged. But the chapter is flawed in several ways, concealing as much it is eager to let us in on the terror of necklace. The authors are Ntuthu Nomoyi, who conducted the interviews, compiled field notes, analysed the data on which the article is based, and Willem Schurink, who designed the study and took the lead as far the construction of the chapter is concerned. The study was undertaken in New Brighton, Kwazakhele, and Red Location. The first author spoke to 10 necklacers, 4 family members of victims of necklacing, 2 survivors, and 2 community members who observers of the act

using “unstructured and focused interviews and informal conversation” (p152). But against their claim that they “employ the relativistic approach to deviance and crime”, and depend to a great extent on symbolic interactionism, in their research study, the authors fail to connect any of these espoused theoretical moves to the interview texts. Turning to the interview material, one is led to believe that most of the interviews except a few instances where there the text is in is Xhosa (with translation in brackets where necessary), the interviews were in English. There is no claim anywhere that the interviews were done in anything but English. Indeed endnote 5 states that “insiders’ views of necklacing and related aspects are mostly presented verbatim” (p72). This is a very suspect claim. For one, the extracts are too neat to be real spoken language. Sentences such as, “We were mad with rage” (p156), and “As the *itayara* continues to burn, it becomes smaller and smaller as it *imbeds* itself into the body of the screaming and begging victim” (last italics mine) (p164), suggest that there was both a translation and cleaning of material, but also idiosyncrasies of the researchers creep in. Why, for instance, was *itayara* left untranslated, when whatever word *imbeds* replaces was. It is my strongly considered opinion that researchers working with speakers of African languages should be faithful to the original words of the speakers (including a transcription key if possible, failing which a reference to one), by inserting them in the body of the work, or as footnotes/endnotes. One might even argue that in a book on violence and aggression, this is much more important. As a methodological move, proceeding this way makes it possible for readers to check on the quirks of authors in translation/interpretation, but also all the other things which the turn to language in social science has shown. Last it also deals in a limited way with the questions of readership, of audiences, of intellectual production, who is being addressed in writing, from where do we speak, how we relate to our “subjects”, and so on. Maybe that is why there are other startling comments made by Nomoyi and Schurink. After talking about local committees in the townships, on page 55 they maintain that they have then “outlined the *main* structures and actors in the liberation struggle in the three townships under discussion” Kangaroo courts, street and area committees, and forums were never the *main* structure of the liberation movement in South African townships, and there is no reason the Eastern Cape was an exception to this case. On the same page the authors provide what could be construed as a definition or something akin to that of necklacing: “an *indigenous* punishment that was introduced by the comrades”.

Last is Don Foster’s, and his former student, Kevin Durrheim’s, article. The two tackle crowds in an otherwise sophisticated register. They locate themselves within a discourse analytic framework, enlisting Foucault in the process. Their chapter goes into explanations of crowd violence. It takes and shows some of the limitations of the classical psychology of crowds of Le Bon, pass more contemporary offerings such as de-individuation, emergent norm theory, Smelser’s value-added model, the rational choice approach, relative deprivation theory, up to Tajfel’s work on social identities. Next it turns to changes and criticisms leading to new representations of crowds, violence and control. The authors end by looking at new crowd psychology, returning to social identity theory and Turner’s modifications, self-categorisation theory.

Now, besides the fact the two apply these theories to crowds and civil violence much of what they say is covered in the earlier chapter by Bornman. This repetition diminishes in a small way their own engagement, but also Bornman’s contribution. It is rather a waste of space and energy which could been applied for other innovative thoughts on the subject. That is not the only repetition though. Under the section on new technologies and crowd

control, Foster and Durrheim go over the same ground de Kock and Schutte do. Both chapters end by looking at the work of the Goldstone Commission. Such repetitions signal a lack of communication between the authors which the editors should have tried to anticipate and to encourage reading each other's contribution to the most challenging problem we face as a country, as a society in the middle of trouble, as different communities speaking different "languages" to add it, and as individuals with divergent views and experiences of the problem.

However some of the problems noted might par for the course when doing, or reading, such a collection. It is perhaps the nature of a multi-perspectival collection to end up for instance with articles of uneven power, repeating each other, or simply put fill a gap. The strength of such a project, bringing together authors with dissimilar theoretical leanings and experiences to bear on a particular and pressing problem, can often be its very weakness, unless editors are vigilant about other matters besides technical style. Or vice versa, the contributions which are lacking in respect or another, new theoretical understanding or new research findings, get balanced by those stronger on these points.

REFERENCE.

Fanon, F (1967) **The wretched of the earth**. London: Penguin.