Violence Explained

by John Burton

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Reviewed by Phil Leather

This is a challenging book, if nothing else. The basic thesis put forward in it is that almost all antisocial behaviour stems from the demand for compliance inherent in forms of social organisation which are built upon adversarial principles and power relationships. Specifically, it argues that violence, crime and antisocial behaviour result from the alienation of basic human needs for recognition and identity, which follows the forced compliance of the individual to social rules and norms derived from competitive and sectional interest.

Society's denial of these basic recognition and identity needs, Burton argues, is responsible for violence and aggression at all social levels, from domestic violence, to participation in street gangs, dictatorial leadership and terrorism. Rejected, then, is any individual aetiology of violence, eg, that based upon the concept of the aberrant or antisocial personality. Instead, the emphasis is placed firmly upon an analysis of the structural factors and social conditions which might have led to them. Fundamentally, it is the denial of a valued identity which characterises many roles in contemporary society, eg, the unemployed, the unskilled and the dissident, and it is the disaffection and frustration which follow this denial that then result in violence. The important point is that, in running counter to basic human needs, the social conditions themselves can be seen as a form of violence towards the individual.

The issue here is not democracy per se, but the manner of the democratic process as it is currently construed. Society should not be abandoned, Burton argues; it is the construction of society based upon the politics of power and coercion that is wrong. Violence, like crime and other forms of antisocial behaviour, is the result of failed political, economic and social systems in which the policy and administrative decisions made have manifestly adverse effects on large sectors of society.

It is not the prevention of violence that is therefore sought, but its elimination through processes of collaborative and participatory decision-making which build upon community-based consensus and consent. At the very least, the outcome of this, Burton contends, ought to be the avoidance of conflict between members of society, whether individuals, groups or nations.

Having constructed this analysis of the problem in Part I of the book, the author proceeds in Part II to consider each of the various adversarial institutions which are responsible for the alienating character of contemporary society: the family, leadership, legislatures, academe and public service, the workplace, the legal system and the system of international relations. Part III considers some of the principal changes which are required in existing institutional arrangements and in the very manner of our thinking if the required move from compliance and compulsion to consensus and consent is to be achieved.

Principal amongst these changes is the call for holistic thinking. In part, this entails the contextualising of human social problems, eg violence, within the social and living conditions which give rise to them, ie alienation and disaffection. The complexity of analysis which this demands in turn entails the rejection of narrow academic and professional specialisms. Adversarial debates between competing 'ologies' and 'isms' must give way to informed and collaborative strategies of understanding. However appealing, simple propositions, eg, that violence is simply the result of the aberrant individual, do no justice to the complexity of human affairs. Burton's book is a timely reminder of the need for shared understanding, not least in light of the pressures for greater academic and professional specialisation and the resultant drift towards increased sectional interest.

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