

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 584 pp. \$US 45.00 hardcover (978-0-691-13313-3)

I was recently at a local burger shop when two strangers started to argue about their place in the queue. Their tones escalated, one swore at the other, tension mounted and although I wondered whether violence might ensue, it did not. Randall Collins's newest book, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*, asserts that only a small portion of the population is involved in violence and an even smaller percentage is actually competent at it. Collins argues that existing theories all proceed from a false premise: violence is easy to do. He argues that violence is, in fact, difficult and best understood by analyzing the micro-situational dynamics that engender it.

If the assumption that violence is easy is false, as Collins argues, evolutionary theory and macrolevel sociological theorizing cannot accurately dissect violence and its causes. Evolutionary theory mistakenly assumes that human genes are somehow primed for violence. But physiological responses to violence such as urinating, vomiting, and sweating challenge biological explanations. Furthermore, Collins suggests that even if some individuals are predisposed to anger, this does not explain why they are only violent sometimes, or why nonangry people can be violent. In fact, Collins asserts that humans have evolved specific traits that make fighting difficult, not easy: "we've evolved in such a way that fighting encounters a deep interactional obstacle, because of the way our neurological hard-wiring makes us act in the immediate presence of other human beings" (p. 27). His focus on interactions also challenges macrosociological theories of violence that assume violence is easy once motivation exists. Replying to this, and supporting the methodological and ontological foundation of his book, Collins argues that an analysis of violence must concentrate on the foreground, i.e., the situational dynamics, not background factors. After all, no social group has a monopoly on violence and no group practices violence to the exclusion of nonviolent behaviour.

Collins builds his thesis on the foundation of the theory of interaction ritual that he has constructed over the past few decades. Premised on Durkheim's concern with the ritual production of solidarity, and Goff-

man's focus on microlevel interaction as the basic analytic unit, he seeks to understand the complexity of violence situationally, not in terms of macro entities like race, class, or gender. Violence is a particularly interesting interaction because it requires an overcoming, and reversal, of the solidarity that is built up in all microinteractions.

According to Collins, most conflicts, like the burger shop confrontation, do not result in violence. This is because the actors involved must overcome a situational, emotional mechanism: confrontational tension and fear. Confrontational tension/fear results from the abnormality of violent interactions compared to standard interaction rituals. Collins asserts that "the tendency to become entrained in each other's rhythms and emotions means that when the interaction is at cross purposes people experience a pervasive feeling of tension" (p. 20). Thus, for violence to occur, the situation must provide mechanisms to neutralize, overcome, and reverse actors' confrontational tension/fear. Even when conflict escalates into violence, the effects of confrontational tension/fear are apparent as the violence enacted is usually brief and incompetent.

Collins pays more attention to how violence occurs, rather than to why. Data including personal interviews, news articles, and analysis of photographs of conflicts and violent situations, show two pathways around confrontational tension/fear. The first broad pathway involves attacking a weak victim. Here, Collins is not referring solely to physical weakness. Instead, weakness may also be a fear of "breaking the fundamental solidarity ritual" (p. 135). Attacking a weak victim can take the form of bullying, hold-ups, or domestic violence, or in its most fantastic form, what Collins terms "forward panic." When tension and fear between actors is maintained, in part by building upon itself, for a prolonged period, it eventually forces one side to fall, not "out" of the confrontational situation, but "toward" their enemy. The result is periods of such intense emotional entrainment that the subsequent violence takes the form of mass rapes, murders, and torture — hot rush, piling on, and overkill as Collins refers to them. Regardless of its form, the key point is that attacking a weak victim necessarily involves a struggle to establish emotional dominance of a situation.

The second pathway around confrontational tension/fear is to make violence controllable. Forms of violence that Collins discusses here include fair fights, vendettas, moral holidays, sports, and violence as fun and entertainment. In these cases, formal rules or other agreed upon conditions make violence predictable, and in some respects, staged. Groups may also contribute to the circumvention of confrontational tension by providing the actor(s) with the support and solidarity needed to provide them with the emotional energy to move from conflict to violence.

Collins offers a broad range of empirical examples to support his view that violence is difficult and requires specific mechanisms to be enacted. In accordance with the broad scope of his book, critiques will come from multiple perspectives. Neuropsychologists will ask why a theory that is focused on emotional attunement and entrainment has not touched on the neurophysiological aspects of emotions. Social evolutionists will wonder if Collins's notion of confrontational tension/fear can not be subsumed by David Wilson Sloan's (2007) pioneering work in group selection. Biologists and (social) evolutionists will question the extent to which Collins's theory explains the root causes of violence, focusing as they do on the high proportion of violent behaviour by children and males.

Sociologists will, similarly, raise questions from varied perspectives. For example, how does Collins's theorizing bear on the literature in gender studies that situates rape within broad, patriarchal power structures? What are the practical considerations of Collins's assertion that acting like a victim helps to intensify violent situations?

Historical sociologists will appreciate that Collins is committed to a second volume dedicated to the macrohistorical aspects of violent situations. However, what are the ontological foundations that allow for a mechanical separation of microsituational and macrohistorical factors? Are they not, in a dialectical manner, both constituting and constituted? Even Goffman's dramaturgical approach does not deny the constitutive significance of history. The "front stage," "back stage," and "outside" are not rigid "ahistorical" characterizations but are established historically and are subsequently fluid. Thus, when Goffman states in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that "a certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time," and "through social discipline, then, a mask of manner can be held in place from within" (pp. 56, 57), he is clearly referring to the dialectical, creative role of the individual in confronting an already existing sociality and either maintaining or altering it in their purposeful activity. After all, Goffman's concepts of idealized performances, unmeant gestures, team collusion, and impression management all imply that historically defined (and developing) standards exist, against which "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing" (p. 72). By relying so heavily on such transcendental phenomena as solidarity and confrontational tension/fear, Collins has forgotten that even these analytical tools must be situated historically.

The broad scope of the anticipated critiques does not deny this book's worth. In fact, it suggests the opposite. Collins seeks to explain an aspect of human behaviour that is at once sociological, historical, bio-

logical, and psychological. Insofar as his analysis has sought to highlight its micro-situational aspects, he must be applauded. In the future, only interdisciplinary research will be able to approach this topic with the same vigor, and coherence as Collins has provided us in this book.

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