

Collins, Randall. *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Princeton and Oxford. Princeton University Press. 2008. 563 pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-13313-3. \$46.00.

Social psychology, according to Richard Sennett, “can best be defined as the study of the relationship between people’s emotional life and the social conditions they experience.” Collins’ *Violence* is a definitive work explaining how men and women’s emotional life influences their practice of violence.

Collins’ key assertion is made on the very first page: he argues that a “vast array of types of violence...can be explained by a relatively compact theory.” On page 19 he expands: “My aim is a general theory of violence as situational practice.” Close to the end of the book (p449), he defines his subject matter precisely and narrowly: “Violence is an interactional accomplishment in a situation structured by emotion.”

The brilliance of Collins’ approach is captured in how he structures his discussion of violence. Those who think violence is the province of the criminal will be struck to find Collins beginning by probing violent responses by soldiers and police and comparing their reactions to domestic abusers, robbers, gangbangers, and bullies. His comparisons of ace fighter pilots and hit men, in their cold, calculating, and aggressive natures, might also disturb the normal science approach of many criminologists.

The key concept that Collins presents is that of “forward panic” and he begins its description with police killings and infantry charges. Forward panic, for Collins, is the primary explanation for the social psychological processes that engender and prolong violence. It is Collins’ fundamental independent variable, focused on a specific emotional state that he generalizes across time, place, race, and gender.

“A forward panic is a zone in time where the emotional impulses are overwhelming, above all because they are shared by everyone: by one’s supporters and fellow attackers, and in a reciprocal way, by the passive victims.” (p 121). The book is a superb commentary on how the emotional energy created by the situation of forward panic produces violence. Collins looks at infantry in war waiting until the instant occurs when a charge leads to total domination: police ganging up to beat a helpless victim; mobs at soccer games; sports teams on an emotional charge or “run”, and the mob violence of lynching, among many other examples. Collins’ exhaustive treatment of the forward panic is a major contribution to the literature and the term is certain to become a standard part of our vocabulary on violence.

Collins is also aware of the limitations of his theory, promising a second volume that "expands the frame to include that which is left out." This may prove difficult. Collins' perspective firmly puts situational matters in the foreground and his stated intention is to dispel or "bracket" the importance of background conditions, whether of race, gender, economics, or culture (p. 34).

This micro-sociological perspective championed by Collins has had broad influence. My own field, gang research, has been strongly shaped by a similar "group process" perspective that elevates "aleatory" situational factors over background conditions like race. The group process perspective of Short and Klein ably describes how interactions within the gang lead to violence. Further consideration, however, finds such universal group processes have little correlation with variations in rates of gang violence between cities or different ethnic groups. Variation in gang violence appears to be related more to background conditions, like racial frustration, spatial distribution, or the socio-economic history of a city.

This problem in Collins' situational perspective can best be seen by citing a passage where he comments on the remarkable group of pictures and website "Without Sanctuary" (<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/>). These are a set of postcards made by early 20th century southern American whites from photographs where they posed next to lynched black people. Collins comments:

"Our first reaction may well be to interpret the gestures of the demonstrative extremists as expression of the racism shared by the crowd (or the entire society) in their actions and bodily expressions. But this would be to ignore what we actually see: a small number of individuals stand out from the crowd." (pp.425-6).

Collins adroitly explains lynching by dissecting the emotional and violent responses of a few in a larger mob. But the larger context here, of slavery, segregation, and racism, seems to me much more important. Collins however, insists: (p. 4), "the situation of violence itself has a dynamic that is more pervasive than racism."

The reader must decide whether s/he is convinced by this. Then the reader can tackle Collins' principle conclusion (p 334): "The good news is that there is nothing primordial about the things that people fight about. They are not long-lasting or deep-rooted social identities and antagonisms; the strength of such identities are products of just how intense the ritual technology is that situationally produces them. The bad news is that we are capable of creating new causes for violence, however ephemeral they may be." Collins' *Violence* explains social psychological processes better than any other I've read. His descriptions, however, come perilously close to de-linking these processes from "background" social conditions.

John M. Hagedorn, University of Illinois-Chicago