

THE THEATRE OF VIOLENCE: NARRATIVES OF PROTAGONISTS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONFLICT

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After all the chaos and violence which characterised life under apartheid and the struggle for freedom, and which was testified to in hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, along come the sociologists and the historiographers and the psychologists to piece together some understanding of what occurred and how. One is left with a bemused sense that social science is indeed a strange and wondrous thing. "Strange" inasmuch as it is a remaking of times past, and "wondrous" if it can recreate that past in a way which is useful for us to find our way in a new political and social order.

This sort of ambivalence, on several levels, is fundamental to *The Theatre of Violence*, and gives rise to both its weaknesses and its strengths. The weakness is a tendency to respond to powerful contradictions by framing them in "nicer" non-confrontational terms. The most glaring examples are in the book's very title: "theatre of violence"? "Protagonists" in the South African "conflict"? No doubt, the authors wrangled a lot over these words, and I appreciate their nuanced objection to "perpetrator", but my hunch is that this framing afforded the writers a bit of "neutral" distance for themselves in what was clearly an intense and difficult work - and I'm not sure that's a bad thing. I think it's important that this sort of inquiry isn't dressed up and smoothed down as if these are easy issues. In the same vein, I appreciated their frank admissions of discomfort with some of their informants. However, sometimes I wish they had been more straightforward. For instance, while the book declares that the state-sanctioned violence of apartheid cannot be equated with the violence of the popular struggle

against it, like the TRC it doesn't do so very convincingly for those who feel that there has been far too much equating going on.

However, the book is fascinating. Its core chapters present narratives, mostly from TRC amnesty applicants, in four spheres: police, intelligence, liberation movements and township conflicts (SDUs and SPU's). In the majority of cases, the authors sought out people in leadership positions, those who had a broader perspective on events and greater access to information and power. It is apparent that the study's goal isn't representivity so much as the presentation of a range of perspectives on what leads people to take up violence in a political conflict. The stories are clearly laid out, and full of direct quotations which give a real sense of the person. I was regularly surprised - for instance, by APLA's Letlaba Mphahlele's calm acknowledgement of the political and organisational shortfalls in the PAC, or by the level of conflict between police and defence force members.

The opening and closing theoretical chapters are also fine. There is useful analysis of the factors that lead to violence, and of the ways people take or displace responsibility for their actions. These are contained within a larger "relational" conceptualisation of political violence that moves away from notions of self-contained individualism and essentialism, and brings attention to the linguistic, power, temporal, institutional and emotional elements of such actions.

The growing interest in "perpetrator" testimonies is providing fresh insights. For instance, we see here how the TRC's legislated requirement that amnesty could only be granted for "politically-motivated" acts forced applicants to fit their often complex situations and motivations into this simple criterion, forcing misrepresentation and often putting them at odds with the other criterion of "complete disclosure". The authors also draw attention to the deep - and largely untapped - desire of former combatants to contribute to building peace in their communities.

As Charles Villa-Vincencio remarks in the foreword: "To understand is not to forgive. A complex, contested and always unfinished process, understanding is a struggle." *The Theatre of Violence* is a valuable contribution to that process and that struggle.