The Role of Structural Violence

Peace researchers as well as anti-war activists generally concentrate their efforts on understanding and preventing armed conflicts and the incidence of overt violence. However, the recent emphasis on the concept of positive peace—referring to a condition of society in which exploitation and violence are minimized—has broadened the discussion of the problem.

The traditional meaning of violence suggests that it is physical and readily apparent through direct injury or the infliction of pain. The Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung notes however that it is important to recognize the existence of another form of violence, one that is more indirect and insidious. This structural violence is typically built into the very structure of social and cultural institutions. Many situations of negative peace are rife with structural violence—both ancient Egypt and imperial Rome practiced slavery, and were rigid despotisms. There were extended periods without wars but the “peace” that prevailed was a negative peace at best. (In German, the word for cemetery is Friedhof, literally “peace yard.”).

Structural violence has the effect of denying people important rights such as economic opportunity, social and political equality, a sense of fulfillment and self-worth, and so on. When people starve to death, or even go hungry, a kind of violence is taking place. Similarly, when human beings suffer from diseases that are preventable, when they are denied a decent education, housing, an opportunity to play, to grow, to work, to raise a family, to express themselves freely, to organize peacefully, or to participate in their own governance, a kind of violence is occurring even if bullets or clubs are not used. Violence is done when the optimum development of each human being is denied because of race, religion, sex, sexual preference, age, or whatever. Structural violence is another way of identifying oppression.

Under systems of structural violence, otherwise “good people,” thinking themselves peace loving and at peace, may participate in “settings within which individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever intending to do so, just performing their regular duties.” Hannah Arendt, writing about Adolph Eichmann, referred to the banality of evil to emphasize the fact that routine, work-a-day behavior by unremarkable people can contribute toward horror. Employees of the Union Carbide pesticide plant at Bhopal, India, did not see themselves as contributing to structural violence, but they did, to the polluted land as well as to a system of economic exploitation, even before the chemical leak that killed thousands in 1984.

Structural violence, including misery, hunger, repression, and alienation, most often works slowly, eroding human values and eventually, human lives. By contrast, direct violence generally works much faster and is more dramatic. In cases of direct violence, even those people no specifically involved in the conflict are inclined to take sides. News coverage is often intense, and because the outcome is often quite real and undeniable—such as dead bodies and property destruction—the viewer is more likely to pay attention and to be concerned. World interest in student-led-protests against the Chinese government in 1989, for example, increased dramatically when Chinese troops and tanks opened fire.

(After David Barash and Johan Galtung)