

## Internal Conflict

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**Review Essay**

**Internal Conflict**

Warren, Kay B., ed. *The Violence Within: Cultural and Political Opposition in Divided Nations*. Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1993.

Sederberg, Peter C. *Fires Within: Political Violence and Revolutionary Change*. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994.

A collection of case studies from the disciplines of anthropology and political science, the Kay Warren anthology eschews what its practitioners consider distortions of conflict when examined in a "top-down formulation(s) of culture and change which concentrates on the power of the state, formal institutions ..." (p. 1) The result, the editors argue, is that those most directly involved in conflict are often treated as passive and ignorant. Thus, the authors are more concerned about the role of conflict in producing and/or changing culture rather than a culture which produces conflict. To this end they offer studies in the manifestation of conflict intraculturally. At times, however, this approach appears a bit too inclusive. "Interpreting La Violencia in Guatemala: Shapes of Mayan Silence & Resistance" by Warren, offers a compelling and vivid example of how *la violencia*, an outside force, was instrumental in exacerbating existent cleavages within the Trixanos Mayan community of San Andres. The second section of the chapter switches to an examination of narratives from the past using gender imagery and violence to understand the self through a focus on individual relationships. While this is not outside the stated purposes of the work, the transitions are weak, leaving the reader thinking that this portion might have served the work better as a separate section. "Politics of Identity in a Palestinian Village in Israel" by Davida Wood and "Contested Images & Implications of South African Nationhood" by Anthony W. Marx represent the anthology's strongest chapters. Wood challenges the tendency of conflict analyses to treat categories of identity as if they are mutually exclusive. The author argues that these frames of reference constitute a multiplicity of identities best understood in Palestinian Israeli society through the shifting nature of power and authority on the local level. Thus, the reader is treated to an excellent case study of the intersection of national community and the patriarchal hamula as a source of potential political violence. Marx takes up the issue of representation through contested claims to nationhood. He defines "nation" as "... the collective aspirations whereas the state is the legal institutionalized fulfillment of one version of this goal. If the state is the body, the nations is the soul or, in plural systems, of the souls." (p. 160) This chapter is particularly strong in its elaboration of the historical shifts in self-understanding of the African National Congress (ANC) from its inception to the present and the role these shifts in identity played in bringing about the dismantling of apartheid.

Sederberg shares with the contributors to Warren's book a concern with the ways in which political violence "struggles to control and transform the existing political

community." (p. xiii) Sederberg's emphasis, however, is on revolution as a peak experience of communities. Arguing that most literature on revolution provides too many as opposed to too few explanations for these events, the author reviews the literature on revolutionary violence and offers perspectives on these events. The premises and purposes of the book offered in the preface and introductions are, however, somewhat misleading. Sederberg's most important contribution is sharpening such concepts as political violence, coercion, social and political order. Sederberg shares common ground with the contributors to Warren's anthology in that he situates culture as an important source of order in social relations. Identification of cultural inconsistency, cultural inadequacy, and cultural incompetence as sources for instability and political violence provide important theoretical insights missing from Warren's book. Likewise the section on tension management detailing strategies, such as conservative change, deception and deflection, rituals of rebellion, repression, and compartmentalization, add an increased coherence to what often seems a fragmented literature on conflict management and resolution. The strongest contribution to conflict literature that Sederberg's book provides, in my opinion, is the chapter, "Defining Politics, Violence, and Revolution." Striving for a definition of politics "broad enough to encompass the richness of our political experience" Sederberg offers the following: "[p]olitics consists of all deliberate efforts to control mutual interaction." (p. 36) Communities ranging from families to the nation-state are constructed around mutual interaction. Sederberg is careful, however, to delimit his definition of politics, noting that the definition refers to, not all human behavior, but only that behavior which is deliberate. As such, violence becomes political to the extent that "coercion, force, and violence take on meaning only within political communities." (p. 46) Sederberg provides a rich comparison of forms of violence juxtaposing them to contending definitions of revolution. I consider the theoretical portion of the book to be one of the most important theoretical contributions to conflict theory of recent periods.

Last year I introduced a course, Comparative Political Violence, for upper-level class members at Muhlenberg College using both the Warren and Sederberg books. Despite the oft-repeated cries of "too much theory" in my upper-level classes, participants in this class reported that they found Sederberg's book clear, well-organized and exciting in its presentation. Most significantly, they reported that they might not have understood distinctions around the concept of political violence which had posed problems for them in the Warren book without the theoretical discussions in Sederberg's book. Interestingly, they found most of the case studies in the Warren book more accessible than Sederberg's, citing the important complementarity offered by the Warren chapter on the evolution of the ANC with Sederberg's focus on the revolutionary outcomes of the ANC. I strongly recommend the use of both books for anyone teaching courses on conflict or violence as well as researchers.

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